

WARS AND POSTWARS

The political threshold of the future in contemporary science fiction comic strips, films and TV series

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SUMMARY

After September 11 attacks, the narrative background of north American science-fiction in cinema, television and comic, radically faces the matter of collective imagery, splitted between the affirmation of issues relating national security and the observance of democracy's essential values. The present article explores how that horizon, duplicated and yet not resolved, is developed though the great comic saga *Civil War*, where the whole narrative universe of Marvel is put at stake and, therefore, questions the possibility of an American science fiction imagery.

KEY WORDS

War, Postwar era, Science fiction, Comic, Film, Television series, Terrorism, United States, September 11 attacks, National security, Conspiracy theory, Democracy, Espionage, Revolution, Complot, Double identity, *Civil War*, Marvel, American imagery, Serialisation

ARTICLE

1. After September 11th, the setting of US science fiction in the cinema, on television and comic strips follows plots that address head on the very question of the American collective imagery. What for the eighties and much of the nineties was the territory of a New Hope, today even more than in the past shows the other side associated to the idea of the New World: not harmony between man and nature (as tenaciously sought as it is never found) but pain, aggression, violent social and cultural differences between social classes and ranks, war against an external enemy and, even more, against an internal enemy. The American collective imagery is divided, more acutely than before (with a return of "phantoms" or fears experienced during McCarthyism and the Cold War, more likely to heighten conflicts), between entreaties of democratic liberalism and calls for a renewed supremacy based on the value of security.

The latter is principally understood as a war on terrorism, a constant struggle against the chaos that comes from antagonistic social, religious and ethnic models. As far as security is concerned, the American collective imagery reveals an unresolved, if not originally conflicting, dialectic, in the desperate search for reconstruction. A considerable part of contemporary US fiction establishes narrative, symbolic and metaphorical meanings to duality and to the dilemmas that attack security, whether or not this is the most important value.

Duality is manifest in the meanings placed in alternative and opposing positions in many audiovisual narratives:

- a) Rapidly reaffirming the supreme principles of the American Constitution (a guarantist view, which defends the untouchable principles of freedom against all appearances and confirming the presumption of innocence); or
- b) Defending and guaranteeing the security of the people even at the cost of losing the founding principles of US democracy (a police and secret service view, in which the rate of conflicts with anyone or anything *different* increases considerably).

Cinema, television and comic strips in the USA express in a number of different ways the need to give voice, expression, representation to the burning issues of democracy and security, to the point of blurring the outlines of the American identity. We go from Steven Spielberg's *Terminal* (2004) to TV fiction such as *Lost* (2004-2007) and *Jericho* (2006), to comic strips such as *The Avengers* or *X-Men*. This does not just happen in science fiction; but, once again, this genre that covers a number of media and which has always been concerned with the task of imagery the scientific and technological future of present society appears best suited to expose clearly the complexity of the value of security in its tense relationship with rights of freedom.

Science fiction radically changes the fundamentals of American collective imagery after September 11th. It proposes stories in which the obsessive psychosis of the terrorist plot and, hence, the strategy

of spy defence (an echo of the *conspiracy theory*¹ projected onto science fiction imagery) becomes explicit, or implicit, underhand, internal.

Implicitly, the obsession prevails in *Lost*, accumulating omens and fears based on a dark plan unfolded in parallel, yet not always fungible, universes, (a "normal" world in which rifts in the time-space continuum open up, leading to an island where mysterious events take place amid natural settings and technological sites). A television series that erodes the fabric of the present and the past, projecting a future made up of parallel layers all apparently equally likely, *Lost* provides, in an allegorical key, an internal political reflection of the model of community among individuals who can regain control over their common destiny either with strategies of solidarity or with actions strongly marked by violence and conflict.

Explicitly, to the contrary, the obsessive fear of external and/or internal terrorism against the United States, with an even more diffusely collective vibration, stands out in the narrative threads of *Jericho*, a TV series based on an America that has survived an atomic attack. Here (exactly as in one of the original predecessors of this fiction, namely the film *Red Dawn*, 1984, by John Milius), the American community model is under discussion, placed in territories at the frontiers of the West where the conflict with external or internal enemies links individuals to few orderly structures of society, testing their capacity to resist attack. *Jericho* puts forward the hypothesis of a "post-social" imagery in which family, more than any other tradition, or formulation ratified by custom, even overcoming racial, ethnic or class prejudice, is reaffirmed on an essentially sentimental base and on the extreme ability to resist isolation and chaos.

2. The American collective imagery of technological and sociological science fiction is replayed heavily in current comic strips sagas. In the Marvel Comic series published in 2006-2007, not only do great changes take place (similarly to the way in which, in the early nineties, there was a stringent reformulation of the superhero universe in the competing publisher, D.C. – Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Hawkman and many others in sagas such as *The Dark Knight's Return*, *The Death of Superman* or *Crisis on Infinite Earths*).

In relation to CIVIL WAR – a civil war between superheroes led on one side by Iron Man/Tony Stark and on the other by Captain America/Steve Rogers – various headlines on Marvel comic strips have highlighted the opposite sides of a division– that it no longer seems possible to overcome, except at the cost of unforeseeable consequences ... – between the protagonists of the best-known monthly series of this leading US publishing house. Duality and division are caused by the irreconcilable positions that the Marvel adopt in relation to the law – known as the Registration Act – approved by Congress and proposed by the American Government after the massacre of civilians

¹ The subject of plots and an atmosphere of conspiracy theory have been variously presented in the cinema and in television fiction at least since the sixties. A recent analysis that summarizes the vastness of the argument relating to plots and conspiracies in literature, theatre and cinema can be found in Micali 2003; a comment on the matter with regard to a single film can be found in Masecchia 2003.

(including many children) by a small group of young superheroes– and *New Warriors* – in the town of Stamford in Connecticut.

The Registration Act requires that all superheroes provide their personal details and declare their loyalty to the American Government. By the pro-government faction– led by Iron Man – the Act is seen as the only way to guarantee the security of citizens and obtain the favour of the population with regard to the superheroes, while by the other side (with the exceptional importance of a Second World War hero such as Steve Rogers/Captain America who openly takes sides against his own government!) the Act is considered a specific and negative attack on the supreme principles of liberty that have made America a land worth living in and worth dying for.

In the seven issues of CIVIL WAR, Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic, leader of the *Fantastic Four* sides with Iron Man, at the price of a dramatic break-up with his wife Sue/The Invisible Woman and with his brother-in-law Johnny Storm/The Human Torch, a break-up which is scattering the historic group of these four fantastic heroes, unless there are radical and unexpected reconstructions; only Ben Grimm/The Thing chooses to remain outside the quarrel, going to Paris, in Europe; for his part, Spiderman /Peter Parker firstly sides with Iron Man, declaring on TV his secret identity, then realizes the mistake he has made and changes sides, explicitly approving on television the point of view of Captain America, respect for the right to be different enshrined by the American Constitution.

The conflict has reached such a point that the two leading figures of the pro-government side -Iron Man/Tony Stark and Mr. Fantastic/Reed Richards – become the masterminds behind and developers of a virtual prison, parallel to the real world, inaccessible except through a hermetic and almost unbreakable portal, a prison called Negative Zone, in which the superheroes who rebel against the Registration Act are kept captive, no sooner are they captured by Iron Man and his giant Sentinels. Violence and hatred among former brothers occupy a space burning with rage; former solidarity and joint efforts are dissolved under their blows...

Captain America, forced to go into hiding, leads a secret rebellion with other colleagues (joined– as mentioned above – by Spiderman/Peter Parker) prepared to oppose the plans of Iron Man and Mr. Fantastic to the final battle. Important heroes of the Marvel comic multiverse, such as Black Panther and Namor, after some attempts at mediation and dialogue, realize the situation and the need to take sides, and faithful to their unbreakable ideals, join Captain America's rebels.

The Marvel multiverse is – for all these reasons – in general fibrillation, suffering earth tremors that totally alter its characteristic features. The light of the changes in the Marvel comic strips is projected in space and time; it goes beyond America (affecting territories such as the African country of the Wakanda where a respected hero such as Black Panther /T'Challa lives, now married to the X-woman Tempest/Ororo) but also beyond the fabric between present, future and past (gaining proximity with the crises generated by the different bioperceptions of the atmosphere by superheroes such as Namor/Submariner, prince of the submerged Atlantis). The vastness of these earth tremors rekindles the adversity between land worlds and ocean worlds, between our planet and the dark side of the Moon, where *The Inhumans* live; it rewrites friendships, rivalries and hostilities developed over

more than fifty years of comic strip stories with the timely reappearance and with intense exploitation of deuteragonists who live on the limits between Law and Crime (such as The Punisher) or villains such as Norman Osborn/Goblin, the Red Skull, Doctor Destiny and several others.

It is a comprehensive temporal redefinition of the goals and interests that have characterized the different series of terrestrial and extraterrestrial characters (the civil war not only involves an extensive conflict between American heroes, but also a risk for the underlying delicate planetary balances as regards the *Inhumans* or *Atlanteans*). The existence of groups and associations of superheroes– *The Avengers*, primarily – is subject to improvised variations: any movement of one affects the political condition of one side or the other, old friends (the above-mentioned Capitan America, Iron Man, Reed Richards and Peter Parker) are transformed into bitter enemies, matrimonial and family bonds formed over decades are broken as a result of irreconcilable discrepancies in the very heart of the different families.

A great scenario of individual and collective identity is in question. The actions of each one are no longer free from the question of responsibility. CIVIL WAR provides, among the many imagined and designed by the clever creative team of Marvel, an unequivocal, forceful *political narrative on the current status of the collective imagery of American science fiction*.

Highly significant is the fact that this political reflection on the collective imagery of American comic strip science fiction revolves around the role played, throughout CIVIL WAR, by Captain America/Steve Rogers. He is not just any hero; he refers us, not just symbolically, to two of the main questions in the US imagery: a) the Second World War, which was the last conflict unequivocally for a good cause (the fight against Nazism, the defence of liberty against dictatorship) compared to successive wars that, since 1945 to the present time, show, to the contrary, how US military decisions are linked instead to strategies of planetary domination; b) the supremacy of the symbols of democracy over other forms of social and political cohabitation, a supremacy already lost in the sixties and seventies when Steve Rogers/Captain America, returning to life after a long hibernation (in the important stories of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby) many years after the end of the Second World War, must face up to the persistence of several dictatorships on the Planet and to the contamination of the American way of life (the war in Vietnam, Watergate, etc.).

The political reflection that CIVIL WAR installs in the narrative background is heightened when a hero of the calibre of Spiderman/Peter Parker, trying to understand something of the mutated scenario in his own country, in a dialogue with Captain America opens up a cultural and mental layer that relates the choices of this comic strip hero to the fundamentals of the collective and public spirit of US democracy (in the words of Mark Twain, this “spirit” is a very different thing from presidential government and the social forces that, in various periods, may administer power). Even Spiderman, in the course of another violent conflict of ideas, puts Mr. Fantastic/Reed Richards against the ropes, re-evoking a bitter and difficult chapter of American democracy: McCarthyism, the peak of unfair and intolerable persecution of the right to free speech and freedom of opinion.

Hence, therefore, the matter of responsibility (evoked by the constant promotional refrain of CIVIL WAR: "*whose side are you on?*") is combined with that of the verification of the truth – apparently acclaimed yet still to be proven– that will be behind the commencement and the trigger– and also behind the end– of this problematic, complex process of internal revolution in the Marvel multiverse. The massacre and the protagonists of the Stamford explosion are, in fact, objects of diverse and non-homogenous searches, by investigators (S.H.I.E.L.D., FBI and others) and by journalists such as Ben Urich (of the *Daily Bugle*) and Sally Floyd (of the *Alternative*) who uncover plots based on the scarcely lawful interests of certain protagonists of CIVIL WAR (at the front, the figure of Iron Man/Tony Stark, a technological entrepreneur close to the Pentagon) who will be able to use the paranoid design of the Registration Act as an instrument for the purpose of consolidating specific forms of power and control of the superheroes' American society.

In this context, a war is unleashed, articulated on two fronts. Firstly, the actions of the two groups in favour of and against the Act are laid out (for Iron Man and Mr. Fantastic, the aim is to capture any superhero who has not complied with the Act; while Captain America chooses to fight clandestinely), actions aimed in general at foiling the plans of the opposite side (perhaps, by infiltrating or posing as superhero friends who prove to be traitors), or at obtaining crucial information that will lead to victory (obtaining the access codes devised by Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic to enter the Negative Zone and freeing the imprisoned superheroes – Captain America uses for this purpose the contribution of The Punisher/Frank Castle) or, finally, at commandeering, as war forces, the supercriminals who have realized the common fate the Act reserves for anyone who operates within the confines of a secret identity (a situation that gives rise to an internal crisis in Captain America's resistance group: The Punisher unexpectedly shoots and kills the two criminals seated at the negotiating table with Captain America, provoking the immediate tough reaction of the latter with regard to the Punisher).

On a second level, synchronous with the first, a dark war of hidden information unfolds, of secret plans that could have laid out, as on a chessboard, the unfolding of the events; plans aimed at executing unspeakable projects or upholding "black" policies under a gloss of conformity and paranoia that have become widespread, to measure the strength of field positions; against such dark plans, a tenacious war is consequently waged by the seekers of the truth, under the guise of investigative journalism or through gestures aimed at restoring the deep awareness of the reality developed in these dilemmas of the Marvel multiverse.

3. At the same time, the conclusion of CIVIL WAR shows a retreat with respect to the original premise: Steve Rogers/Captain America, suddenly realizing that he is fighting against former friends and no longer in the spirit of a universal cause, stops fighting and orders his followers to stand down, surrendering as a prisoner in his identity of Steve Rogers and not as Captain America; Sue and Reed Richards become directly reconciled after the disagreement; Ben Grimm, shortly before the last instants of the conflict between the superheroes, returns to the fold, surprising even Sue ("Did you really think I was going to sit this one out eating croissants?"); Iron Man/Tony Stark reveals himself–

so far, but still to be confirmed ... – as undisputed and yet magnanimous victor, to whom the President of the USA confers responsibility for national security and entrusts him with the decisive choices for the new role of superheroes in American territory.

The apparent conclusion of the mini-saga in seven episodes of CIVIL WAR signals a sort of timidity by the Marvel narrator which has led him to not go the full distance with the outcomes of the internal conflict in the superheroes; the facts seem arranged in favour of the pro-government faction as if any tension and rupture can be overcome with no further consequences. This is certainly a bitter illusion, quickly shown to be underhand, deceitful. In any case, there remains the outcome of a sudden defeat of the rebels– of whom Captain America is the indisputable leader– moved by an *uncontaminated political passion*: individual freedom is the prime principle and strong motivation of any social membership, and of any incentive to represent– by superheroes and mutants– the most significant emergency of the era, which took place on September 11th.

The sensation of this “retreat” finale of CIVIL WAR shows unresolved areas of light and shade. The Marvel multiverse has undergone tragic twists that revolutionize the original course of events, and the fate of some supreme heroes is not fully explained. What will happen now to Spiderman/Peter Parker? How will Namor/Submariner take it and how will the Atlanteans react? From now on, what will relations be like between Earth superheroes and mutants and those of neighbouring planets and satellites (*The Inhumans*, etc.?). And how will the Fantastic Four rebuild the group that is so deeply divided? (For now, between Reed and Sue Richards there is a rapprochement that, in Susan’s words, does not in any way allow a return to the way things were before as if nothing has happened. Both choose to devote themselves to the family and take some time off, while the duo constituted by Black Panther/T’Challa and Tempest/Ororo join the Fantastic Four, to substitute the original couple, at least provisionally. Finally: has Captain America really surrendered? (in reply to the Human Torch/Johnny Storm who remarks “*I never thought Cap would throw in the towel*”, Ben Grimm/The Thing answers: “*If you think he’s thrown in the towel, you don’t know him at all*”).

4. Question after question arises. Some ultimately favour an unforeseeable and sinister consequence of the situations caused by the civil war: Captain America, on the day on which he is to go on trial for his rebellion, in public, by a court, is beaten to death before the crowd. The deadly shadow of the plot (Captain America’s death is attributed to a secret manoeuvre of the Red Skull ...) stretches its hand over the events. Likewise, the disappearance from the symbolic universe-public imagery of an icon returning to the fundamental principles of US democracy has widespread metaphorical reverberations. The disappearance of the quintessential American hero determines new stories that portray with unknown prospects the fates of the other superheroes.

But, at the same time, there are already numerous and incisive repercussions created as a result of the civil war and the Registration Act. Firstly, its preliminary and radical implication is underlined. The Registration Act cancels any residue of *value* in the superhero’s double identity; it specifically

asks the superhero to declare himself, annulling any secrecy or margin of privacy or self-sufficiency, and submit to Government control (under Iron Man). Because of the Act, the secret of double identity is repositioned, in the sense of its *function* and in the sense of its *meaning*. With the CIVIL WAR saga, the extreme skill of the Marvel dramatists gives a new meaning, that did not exist before, to the issue of double identity and the superheroes' capacity to represent collective principles and ideas that individuals can also adopt in the perception of *differentness* experienced towards the *common existence* that is the foundation of society.

CIVIL WAR refocuses the merit of that superheroic gesture that gives vitality to the doubles and alter egos and that provides general motivation for duplications and/or splitting of personality which – from the outset – has been a staple of the Marvel Multiverse. In this context of a conscious symbolic reinscribing of double identity, the choice of Spiderman/Peter Parker is exemplary, when, convinced at first by the reasons of Tony Stark/Iron Man and Mr. Fantastic/Reed Richards and siding with those in favour of the Registration Act, he removes his mask in front of the television cameras and reveals himself to the public with the uncovered face of Peter, and then, with an equally surprising gesture, presents himself again in the television studio declaring that he has made a mistake and consequently changes sides to join Captain America's clandestine rebels. The duplication of choices in the era of CIVIL WAR relaunches, in conclusion, unforeseeably the meaning of double identity.

The Registration Act undoes and reunites the existence of the solid group of superheroes (an affinity and friendship that, in the ingenuous era of the collective imagery of superhero comic strips in the sixties and seventies, motivated the creation of the *Avengers*, *Justice League* etc., between the Marvel and DC universes). The group's options are reconnected to the responsible choices of individuals. Not least among these consequences, the reciprocal solidarity among Mutants – as for the members of Charles Xavier's group of *X-Men* – is in a state of critical suspense; while as individuals – Ororo/Tempest chooses to be with the rebels without this leading to similar decisions in her companions – the mutants experience, within the group, and within their specific genetic condition, threats and transformations that place their existence at risk, in specially written series²...

Everything is reformulated in the Marvel multiverse. The general stability of the multiverse, in the appearance of its ties of continuity – narrative, chronological and symbolic – shows subtle and yet relevant vibrations, that break up the order. In CIVIL WAR the Marvel multiverse reaches a different quality of narrative dimension, compared to its habitual continuity or the compact mesh of the crossover – an effect already clearly seen in the series *House of M* or almost foreseen in *X-Men. E is for extinction*.

² In the episodes of the series *House of M*, the universe of the mutants is shaken to its foundations, on the so-called *M-Day*, or sudden change caused by the powers of Scarlet, alias Wanda Maximoff (daughter of Magnet). Scarlet, normally capable of altering the states of reality, having fallen victim to serious nervous exhaustion, profoundly transfers the universe of the mutants, generating an other World ruled from an extremely dramatic chaos in the course of which some mutant heroes lose their life, while all the others lose their powers, finding themselves suddenly without the mutant gene ...

Does this mean goodbye to continuity and to crossovers? Perhaps, but no-one can tell, in light of impending events in the Marvel multiverse ... It is true that multiple interlacing threads alone are not enough and crossovers are not casual or necessary. A higher level of temporality or spatiality prevails, that displays and unites the identifying marks and narrative typologies of the characters. And causes a dense refraction of consequences between the principal series and the derived series, which produces:

1) a prismatic synchronicity (an array of synchronous stories that constitute an "open whole", always capable of being regenerated all over again from the beginning);

2) a multiply diachronicity, or a temporal discourse carved out on areas arranged as multiple threads of the events.

The past is ravaged by diverse impending presents, and the future is a web spun according to designs in order to observe with regular constancy to investigate how it unfolds, always on the point of dissolving and recreating itself. The Marvel multiverse shows, in these conditions, a Model of co-existing and interchangeable Realities, where it is difficult to single out the one that is most reliable or that is worth being experienced more than or before the other.

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